SONS OF THE DESERT

Change

Sons of the Desert frontman Drew Womack wrote his first song in the second grade, a happy little ditty called "The Sunshine Song." He was proud of his first creation, that is, until older brother Tim told him he'd be in trouble with their parents for writing a "love song." Seven-year-old Drew promptly stuffed the written lyrics behind the family washing machine so he wouldn't get caught.

Years later, to the benefit of country music fans everywhere, Drew realized he had to share his songwriting talents and unmistakable voice with the world. Joining forces with his brother, guitarist Tim Womack, bassist Doug Virden, keyboardist Scott Saunders, and later drummer Rob Steitler, they became a powerhouse band called Sons of the Desert. *Change*, the band's first album for MCA Nashville, is a new beginning for a group of guys who know what it's like to travel a rocky road.

In 1997 the Sons released their debut album, *Whatever Comes First*, on Epic Records. The unique groove of the title track gave them a top 10 hit and caught the ear of both fans and critics alike. Follow up singles "Hand of Fate" and "Leaving October" showcased the Sons' incredible harmonies. Drew racked up his first number one song as a writer when Kenny Chesney took "She's Got It All" to the top of the charts. In 1998, the band landed an opening slot on Tim McGraw's Everywhere tour and soon began recording songs for a second album. All things seemed good, but then the band parted ways with its record label.

While the Sons regrouped, MCA Nashville President Tony Brown was watching. He was already a Sons fan, having caught the band's performance at the Country Radio Seminar's New Faces show.

"I remember Drew's voice just came screaming off the stage," he says.

Later, when the band parted ways with Epic, Brown read about it in the local newspaper and wasted no time.

"A couple of times I have missed calling somebody up by just a few hours, so I came right to the office and called their manager and said, 'Is this true?'" Brown says. "I said, 'If it's true, I want to talk to somebody right now.' It went down that quick."

The band joined the MCA Nashville family, which is known for giving new acts stalled on the brink of stardom a second chance.

"We've had a real good track record of taking acts that have reached that little spot where they're about to break and taking them to the next level, like Vince Gill and Chely Wright," Brown explains. "Sons of the Desert are the same way. I feel like I got them at the right time like when I got Vince Gill. It was one of my lucky signings."

Drew admits the guys were expecting a complete overhaul, from their look to their sound. It ended up just being their look: Drew cut the long hair he'd had since he was 15, and the focus shifted to the three vocalists up front - Drew, Tim and Doug - so the band can more easily connect with fans in an ever-confusing country music market.

"They didn't really want to change us," Drew says. "They just wanted to introduce us to more people basically. It's a cool feeling to know that even though we haven't sold millions of records yet, the people at MCA Nashville think we still have something to offer."

That fighting spirit began 10 years ago in Waco, Texas, where Drew, Tim, Doug and Rob were classmates at McLennan Community College before they were bandmates. Taking their name from a Laurel and Hardy movie, Sons of the Desert had already earned a rabid local following with an early lineup that included Doug on bass. Drew was studying opera, and Tim was playing in another band with Rob on drums. When the Sons lead singer left, Drew stepped in,

later convincing his brother, Tim, to join as well. The new roster duked it out on the competitive Dallas club circuit with then-unknown acts like Lonestar and Ty Herndon.

"We were one of the very few non-hat acts playing on that circuit," Drew says. "The fans wanted to hear George Strait or AC/DC basically, and we played neither."

Instead, the Sons offered up a set list of Steve Earle, Foster & Lloyd and the Desert Rose Band. They learned current singles by bands like Restless Heart and Shenandoah, all the while crafting their own identifiable sound.

Change is the payoff for a decade of hitting the stage in honky tonks far and wide. It's a little bit of John Hiatt, a little bit Steve Earle and a bit of everything else the guys love, while somehow remaining entirely their own. Noted producers Mark Wright (Mark Chesnutt, Lee Ann Womack) and Johnny Slate (Joe Diffie) joined the Sons to produce the album, with Tony Brown working as the band's A & R man. It proved to be a winning combination.

"The energy is so much more present," Drew says. "The first record was kinda ballad heavy, but this time we had a lot more songs to choose from. Right after we tracked it in the studio you could just feel it. It felt like a record immediately. We didn't have to fill it in, it was just magic."

The new album includes cuts by successful Nashville songwriters like Craig Wiseman, Chris Lindsey and Mark Selby. Fellow artist Keith Urban makes a guest appearance on banjo for the song "Ride," and lauded session player Paul Franklin tears up the steel guitar on "Change." The band reworked and re-recorded "Albuquerque," the lone cut saved from the shelved Epic project, and Drew himself wrote or co-wrote five cuts.

"That's the main reason I got into this business," Drew says. "That's my favorite part. I think people like to see artists that write their own music and actually have their own sound."

Drew's songwriting has found its complement in the musical gifts of the band.

"Tim is a killer guitar player, Doug's a great bass player and Scott is a killer piano player," opins Brown. "And the harmonies are incredible."

The Sons' trademark harmonies are so incredible, in fact, that fellow artists continue to enlist their services in the studio. The guys soared on the chorus of Ty Herndon's number one hit, "It Must Be Love," and they're now getting monstrous reviews for their haunting contribution to new labelmate (but no relation) Lee Ann Womack's single "I Hope You Dance."

Unlike *Whatever Comes First*, which tells it like it is, *Change* tells it like it could be. The songs convey a world where life isn't perfect, but the people in it can still imagine something better on the horizon. From the title cut to the funky "Everybody's Got to Grow Up Sometime," *Change* is the creed the Sons have been living day to day. It's the only way they know.

"There's a lot of people who are scared to try new things in this business," Drew says. "They don't want to go too far out, but for music to grow, you need to try new ideas."

In other words, change is good.

sons of the desert

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